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...when the crisis continues

Bronwyn Fredericks

I wish to share a story with you...

One afternoon I had a phone call regarding a young man, whom for the purpose of this story I will name Trevor. Trevor was in the Rockhampton Mental Health Unit and was going to be transferred to the Baillie Henderson Hospital in under a week, the following Monday morning to be exact. It was believed by the person who rang me from Capricorn Citizen Advocacy and the person who alerted that agency that this was not appropriate. We discussed the matter. Baillie Henderson Hospital is a high level care psychiatric facility in South-East Queensland. I knew of some of the stories that had been associated with the facility over the years and I too believed it to be inappropriate for Trevor.

I became Trevor's crisis advocate; someone who could act immediately and bring about some action to not only best meet Trevor's short term needs but to act in a way that would bring about the best favoured option and not the least. At this time I believed that my involvement would be time limited and that once I had been involved in gaining Trevor a place to live in the community that my role would cease. This has not happened and four years later I am still in Trevor's life, I tend to drift in and out as he needs me and as issues arise.

A little more now of the situation four years ago... Trevor was a 20 year old Aboriginal man whom had been described to me and Capricorn Citizen Advocacy as having an intellectual disability, a diagnosed mental illness although still to this day Mental Health Services have not provided us with a diagnosis, having been in the care of the State Government and the foster care system since he was 2 years old, had been in a correctional facility, had no family and who had been before the courts regarding alleged offending behaviours. Trevor was required by a Mental Health directive to have 24 hour supervision which could not be provided in Rockhampton either in the community or in the Mental Health Unit as there were no beds and that Baillie Henderson was the only alternative. They did not have a bed in the Mental Health Unit, which was also inappropriate. I knew at this time that Trevor would need support and that he needed a range of people to act fast, very, very fast.

A meeting was called between myself, an Aboriginal man working in the disability sector, an Aboriginal woman psychologist, Marcus Richards who

was the Coordinator with Capricorn Citizen Advocacy, Lorraine Zeni and myself. Lorraine was instrumental in kick starting us with some strategies. We all went away to find information and explore possibilities. Early on the Friday afternoon we were made aware that Trevor was still being transferred to Baillie Henderson on the Monday morning. At this point I drafted a letter to our local State Member and the then Health Minister and faxed them directly. I used my political and departmental contacts where possible and my authority as the Chairperson of the Bidjerdii Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Health Service. I rang and rang until someone would talk to me. We heard later that day, between 4.30pm and 5.00pm that Trevor was not going to Baillie Henderson. We knew that it was only a breather, we now had to come up with the goods, and we had to find some other options for Trevor outside the Mental Health Unit. I had well and truly become a crisis advocate for Trevor.

From this point I did lots of research, read file notes and talked with people to gain an idea of Trevor's history and who this young man was. I found out that Trevor indeed had family members and some were even living in Rockhampton and others lived in Central Queensland! Further exploration revealed that sadly he couldn't stay with any of these family members. I found out a checked history of movement from one foster environment to another, that he had suffered levels of abuse that should not be tolerated by anyone and that he was in many ways a victim of circumstance and departmental decisions.

A community access package was set up for Trevor with Access Recreation and an accommodation support package of eight hours a day was established by Disability Services Queensland. There was no way that 24 hour a day support could be provided with the monies available. We needed solutions. We needed more than magic from a wand. We needed a home for Trevor, not just any place, somewhere where he would receive 24 hour supervision, where he too would be safe and somewhere where people cared and thought that he mattered.

Access Recreation, Capricorn Citizen Advocacy and I collectively managed to find Trevor a home for a while. It was extremely difficult to sell the concept to Disability Services Queensland. Trevor was to reside out at an Aboriginal, Torres Strait and South Sea Islander organisation house some 10 kilometres out of town. The manager had a knowledge of one of Trevor's foster family's and in time some of his biological family. There were mainly men staying at the house although at times women in crisis additionally stayed there. The organisation had day staff, a cook, cleaner and program worker and a night watchman/ caretaker, Trevor would have someone with him all of the time. The organisation's efforts were supported with the small amount of money from Disability Services Queensland, the rest of their support was all volunteer. He started having counselling with a psychologist, seeing the doctor at the community controlled health service and began a TAFE program.

What was special about the organisation was that it gave Trevor an Aboriginal environment, he had previously stayed with mostly non-Indigenous peoples and wasn't really in touch with his Aboriginality, his ancestry and birth right. Sometimes this was extremely difficult for him as he had grown so accustomed to being serviced by mainstream service providers and he himself responded in ways that weren't in many ways culturally appropriate. I witnessed growth in his Aboriginality and in knowing what to do and how to behave. I remember asking him to accompany me to the NAIDOC Ball, one of the highlights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander week held each July. Trevor was a 'hit' with a number of young women, being the latest new young man in town and he was a 'hit' with the older women as he could do numerous old time dancers. The older women enjoyed having someone to dance with and he loved talking to them about himself and finding out more about who he was as an Aboriginal young man. Trevor additionally attended every NAIDOC day on the Friday of NAIDOC week and came to know more members of the community. The situation with the organisation worked for some 12 months. At this time things began to become difficult with other residents there were others too who also had support needs and this all began to drain on the organisation, who had provided much needed support at a crucial time. At this point in need a host family was found. The credit for this goes to Access Recreation.

What was difficult was still the on-going need to have 24 hour supervision. The host family made numerous changes to their household and Trevor began to reside there with them. He still attended TAFE and got a part-time job. For a while he was happy, there were horses and it was a farm setting out of town. This living environment was one of his goals. I was still his crisis advocate and was called upon numerous times to talk with Trevor, his host family and services regarding situations that would arise. This period of time began a new phase for Trevor and many issues arose involving the police, the court system, the Adult Guardian, his host family, agencies, TAFE, and numerous others. Sadly this arrangement broke down.

Trevor does not currently live in Rockhampton, he lives in another community. He receives 24 hour support with monies provided by Disability Services Queensland. He is living in a house that he calls his own with carers. He is a participant in a one on one offenders program. This level of care could not be provided in Rockhampton. The time from 2000 until now witnessed a number of key individuals, services and I keep Trevor in a stop gap situation where he could have easily fallen through the cracks into Baillie Henderson Hospital or Corrective Services or someone who may have taken advantage of him.

I clearly remember from the past 4 years...

I attended a Mental Health Tribunal Hearing with Trevor on one occasion. At first the Tribunal didn't know if I would be allowed to go in the room with Trevor as his advocate and then it was post-phoned as someone said they had a conflict of interest because they knew me. This caused upset to Trevor and prolonged uncertainty as at this time we were trying to get the 24 hour supervision order relaxed. When we did finally get to the Tribunal, I remember all the persons being introduced before Trevor and I. They were introduced by

their titles, Dr, Mrs, Ms. When they got to me they said Bronwyn Fredericks and when they got to Trevor they just said his first name. It was difficult watching and listening as they discussed the issues. I knew how belittled I felt and I knew Trevor would feel the same. I knew I had to focus on my loyalty to Trevor and acted in a way to meet Trevor's needs.

During the years as Trevor's crisis advocate I have been supported by the staff of Capricorn Citizen Advocacy and at all times acknowledged as Trevor's advocate by Access Recreation, and a few other service providers, all the while knowing that I was independent of these agencies and others. The support from Capricorn Citizen Advocacy has been vital in listening to my fears for Trevor and talking through ideas and strategies, providing me with further contacts for advocacy for Trevor. I did not receive this same support from other bodies or agencies who saw me advocating as possibly sticking my nose in someone else's business or being difficult. I saw them as difficult and I know that I could be difficult, but I could not let their thoughts of me influence what I needed to do in Trevor's interest.

I maintained independence from the friends that Trevor has had over the past four years. I did not get involved with the host family or other people close to Trevor to ensure independence from them and to maintain prime loyalty to Trevor. I know that positions of compromise would not be helpful for Trevor. He needed to know that I was there because I wanted to be and because he mattered.

I have attempted not to be overprotective of Trevor. I do not try to overshadow him, or cover up his behaviours that may not be appropriate. I understand that he must own and accept responsibility when it arises and the consequences of his behaviours when he knows that they are inappropriate. In our Aboriginal way we are taught that we are bosses of ourselves and all that this implies. He can enact this in the best way he can, in this I am confident.

In reflecting, I have at times due to the issues in my own life, physical, social and emotional issues or grieving times not been able to respond to Trevor's situation as best I could. This is the reality of being a human being with human issues too. Sometimes my own needs needed to come first. At these times other people stepped forward to offer the support that I couldn't and to advocate.

Trevor tells me he wishes to return to Rockhampton where he knows people in the community. He does not have this feeling in the town in which he lives. We (services and I) are beginning to think about what mechanisms can be put in place for Trevor when he returns. We will insist on the monies being provided at the same level he is receiving now. We have learnt over the past four years. I have learnt, grown as a person and I have become comfortable with the idea that being a crisis advocate may sometimes mean being there, assisting when crisis' come and go over an extended time.

Some stories have an ending like they lived happily ever after. I know that this is not the reality for people who have a disability and who are vulnerable,

people like Trevor. I know that no magic wand, prince or princess is going to change this situation. I know that advocacy for Trevor has brought about some changes for Trevor and how some people see issues and that these may make it easier for others too. I encourage you to guard your passion about and for citizen advocacy and to fuel your passion for the future. Citizen advocacy is what needs to be part of the on-going story of the lives of people with disabilities in this country. It is part of the on-going story of Trevor and I.